

DISCOVERING VIRTUES IN THE LAND: AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Grade level: secondary; can be adapted for elementary
Work of art: *Niagara Falls* (slide 6)

"I am by no means desirous of lessening in your estimation the glorious scenes of the old world -- that ground which has been the great theatre of human events -- those mountains, woods, and streams, made sacred in our minds by heroic deeds and immortal song -- over which time and genius have suspended an imperishable halo...

And Niagara! that wonder of the world! -- where the sublime and beautiful are bound together in an indissoluble chain. In gazing on it we feel as though a great void has been filled in our minds -- our conceptions expand -- we become a part of what we behold!"

From *Thomas Cole: Essay on American Scenery*, 1834

The vantage point is the view or angle from which you observe a scene. Landscape painters like Cole choose their vantage point very carefully. What is Cole's vantage point in *Niagara Falls*-- an eye-level view, a bird's eye view, a view from below? How does Cole's vantage point of American nature in the painting convey the economic potential of the new nation?

Based on evidence in the painting, how does Cole indicate that spiritual values will play a significant role in the development of the nation? What role does weather play in conveying a sense of divinity pervading the land? What might sunlight symbolize? Storm clouds?

Cole carefully represents particular seasons and times of day in his landscape paintings. How does the time of day and season emphasize where these respective cultures (the Native American and the American settlers) are in their development?

Adapted from work by Museum Classroom Participants from Evanston Township High School